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October 1, 1999

RosettaNet: Teaching businesses to work together

By employing a common application interface, RosettaNet members strive to simplify business-to-business commerce.

By Lauren Gibbons Paul

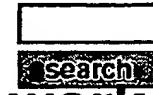
October 1999

When it comes to deciphering ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics, the Rosetta Stone is the key. Similarly, if your company seeks to unlock the mystery of business-to-business electronic commerce, the RosettaNet consortium hopes to help, with a little support from eXtensible Markup Language (XML).

RosettaNet is an ambitious e-business initiative that promises to streamline supply-chain processes to benefit technology manufacturers and their partners. With support from virtually all the major computer hardware and software manufacturers as well as others in the computer supply chain, RosettaNet is quickly gaining acceptance.

The name RosettaNet refers to both the computer industry consortium and the body of business-to-business standards the consortium has begun to create. The group was formed about a year and a half ago to help computer industry companies build standards for automated business-to-business exchanges of typical documents such as purchase orders. Using a standard format allows computer companies and their suppliers to automate the way they interface with each other--rather than having their employees handle the transactions in a costly and non-standard way.

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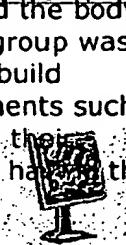
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"We each have so many suppliers and so many customers and they all have their own ways of doing things," says Charlie Martin, CIO at MicroAge Inc., a technology infrastructure provider in Tempe, Ariz. "Certain things don't add value. Like how you send a purchase order or receive one." Computer companies spend a lot of time and money scrambling to master trivial differences in the ways their suppliers do things.

For instance, in the computer industry every company generally has its own way of formatting a purchase order. Large companies may have whole departments of employees whose job it is to reconcile and process huge piles of unlike purchase orders. If RosettaNet takes hold--and it will be at least a year before that becomes clear--computer companies will be able to eliminate most of the people from that process and let their computers exchange the information according to the standards developed by the consortium.

Picking up where EDI fell down

In many ways, the RosettaNet initiative aims to deliver on the promise of paperless, automated, flexible business-to-business commerce that electronic data interchange (EDI) made more than 20 years ago. The acceptance of EDI was hindered by too much variation and its often-prohibitive cost. Companies that want to use EDI to exchange purchase orders and the like must build a custom interface for each partner in order to exchange the data.

With the advent of XML-based RosettaNet standards, computer companies will no longer have to spend the time and money building that custom interface (see sidebar, "At the root of it all"). In the near term, the standard will be embodied in the IT supply chain partners' systems that touch purchasing.

"RosettaNet is further along than most standards efforts," says Frank Gillett, senior analyst at Forrester Research Inc., a market research company in Cambridge, Mass. "What separates RosettaNet from other XML standards efforts [such as cXML, BizTalk, and CommerceOne] is that it goes beyond the XML data standard and has laid out the business process associated with a purchase order, an inventory request, [or] a shipping request."

At the root of it all

The RosettaNet consortium is hardly the first group to attempt to use XML-based standards to streamline business processes in a supply chain. Many proposed extensions to XML such as Microsoft Corp.'s BizTalk and Ariba Corp.'s cXML are attracting notice from companies interested in e-procurement. RosettaNet is hoping its standards will rise above these vendors' proprietary efforts and become de rigueur for IT industry companies.

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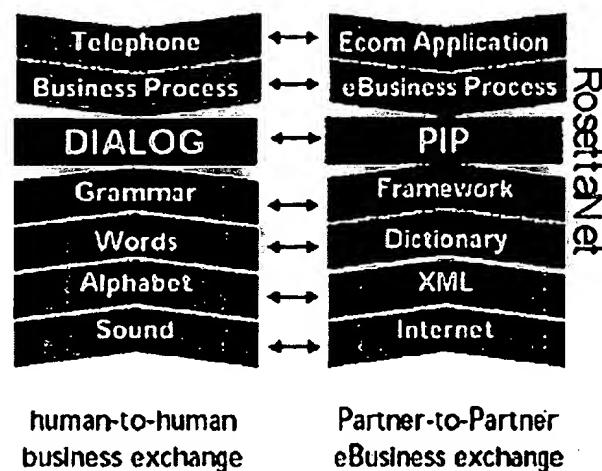
The company: The RosettaNet consortium (www.rosettanet.org), based in Santa Ana, Calif., was founded by Fadi Chehadé in 1997.

The problem: Chehadé felt the IT industry was plagued by waste and duplication of effort in its dealings with supply chain partners.

The solution: RosettaNet, a set of proposed XML-based standards to align business processes among partners in the IT supply chain.

The players: More than 34 industry companies including manufacturers, distributors, resellers, software publishers, and end users (see ["Impressive roll call"](#)).

The status: Several computer industry companies piloted business transactions with each other based on RosettaNet Partner Interface Processes. Thirty-four companies have committed to being ready to use RosettaNet on Feb. 2, 2000.

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The new business communication: At the highest level, an e-commerce application such as an electronic procurement system is the medium for an e-business interaction. For a traditional business interaction, the telephone is the top medium. Source: RosettaNet

The RosettaNet schema involves more than using XML as its fundamental data structure. Fadi Chehadé, founder and CEO of RosettaNet, compares partner-to-partner e-business interchange with traditional human-to-human business (see graphic above). At the highest level, the telephone is the medium for a traditional business interaction, while for an e-business interaction, the medium is an e-commerce application such as an electronic procurement system.

Under the traditional business transaction, employees from two trading partners would establish a dialog (through e-mail, fax or in a conversation) about what was to be purchased and the terms for the sale and delivery of goods. With an e-business exchange within the computer industry, the companies' computers would automatically initiate the purchase of goods, according to the applicable RosettaNet Partner Interface Process, or PIP, such as one for order management. The RosettaNet framework, which has been defined, establishes the grammar for the transaction, just as in the United States, English grammar would govern the dialog between the parties. The RosettaNet dictionary provides a common vocabulary for the transaction.

In the RosettaNet-enabled e-business interchange, XML provides the language the

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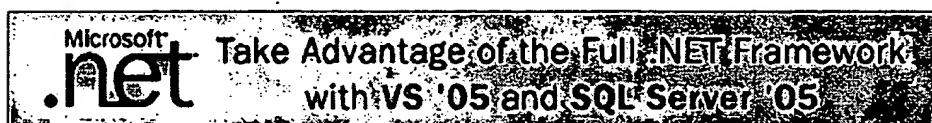
parties' computers will use to exchange data. Using XML lowers the technical barriers to computer-to-computer communications, but it does not help the parties unless they agree upon the business processes (or the words in the language) that the data defines.

That's where RosettaNet excels over the other proposed XML-based standards such as cXML, says Frank Gillett, senior analyst at Forrester Research Inc.

The power of RosettaNet lies in its Partner Interface Processes (PIPs) (42 out of about 100 have been defined so far), which cover a range of common business processes used by companies in the IT supply chain. The fact that RosettaNet defines business processes, as well as the data structure, puts it well ahead of other standards efforts, says Gillett. --

L.G.P.

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